BY THE COMPTROLLER GENERAL

Report To The Congress

OF THE UNITED STATES

Indochinese Refugees: Protection, Care, And Processing Can Be Improved

The continuous exodus of refugees from Communist Indochina in 1979 strained the willingness and the ability of Asian asylum countries to accept refugees and to assist in providing protection and temporary care. GAO reported in 1979 that because of political restraints and the humanitarian plight of these people, the Department of State should seek more active participation of international and voluntary agencies in refugee resettlement. In the past year, conditions at the transit centers and resettlement camps have improved somewhat.

GAO makes additional recommendations to alleviate the continuing problems associated with refugee protection, care, and resettlement.

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COMPTROLLER GENERAL'S
REPORT TO THE CONGRESS

INDOCHINESE REFUGEES: PROTECTION, CARE, AND PROCESSING CAN BE IMPROVED

D I G E S T

Since the Communist governments were established in Indochina in 1975, more than 1.2 million refugees have fled their homelands to other Asian asylum countries due to political persecution, human rights abuses, warfare, and famine. The refugee exodus reached a peak of 58,000 a month in June 1979, but has since subsided to about 3,100 a month. In April 1979, GAO reported on the international efforts to resettle these refugees; this report describes the current situation.

CURRENT RESETTLEMENT CONDITIONS

Although conditions had improved slightly, approximately 284,000 refugees remained in camps at the end of 1979 despite extensive international efforts at resettlement. Over 254,000 refugees have been resettled since August 1977--mostly in the United States, France, Australia, and Canada. In addition, international and voluntary agencies are more involved in refugee care and resettlement. Following the unexpected surge in the number of people fleeing Indochina in early 1979, however, camps became overcrowded. As a result, refugees were not adequately cared for or protected. A doubled U.S. commitment to refugee resettlement--from 7,000 to 14,000 refugees a month--and the use of questionable processing procedures, combined to intensify existing problems.

The refugees' medical conditions and delays in treatment further impeded resettlement. Because of language barriers, incomplete and/or inaccurate documentation supporting refugee assertions, problems were encountered in applying the provisions of the Immigration and Naturalization Act to the increased number of refugees scheduled for resettlement in the United States.

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Monthly quotas of refugee movements were frequently shifted between asylum countries, further complicating resettlement. GAO questions the applicability of certain processing procedures and cites examples where abbreviated procedures could speed resettlement. Streamlining security verification procedures by the Department of State is especially needed.

THE ORDERLY DEPARTURE PROGRAM

To curtail the large number of refugees fleeing Vietnam by boat, Vietnam and the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees reached an agreement in May 1979 for a direct emigration or orderly departure program. The program was intended to allow persons "who want to work abroad or for the purpose of family reunification" to legally travel to resettlement countries.

Although the United States and other countries welcomed the program, difficulties have arisen that are hampering its implementation. By early 1980, only 226 persons had departed Vietnam for the United States under the program.

Success of the orderly departure program is essential if the inherent risks and hardships experienced by the 1979 boat people are to be avoided in the future. A number of obstacles must be overcome, particularly those imposed by the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. The Secretary of State should give special attention to resolving these problems and seeking ways to guarantee the success of the orderly departure program.

REFUGEE PROCESSING CENTERS

The 1979 GAO report pointed out the need for additional temporary care facilities. Two refugee processing centers are now under construction to accommodate 60,000 refugees. Moving refugees to these centers will relieve some of the burden on asylum countries.

Because most center inhabitants will be refugees guaranteed U.S. resettlement, these centers may lose their intended international character. In addition, those refugees guaranteed resettlement in the United States are not included in the current commitment to resettle 14,000 a month, and their subsequent resettlement could potentially increase future U.S. funding and commitments to resettlement of Indochinese refugees.

GAO recommends that the Secretary of State take a lead role in assessing the manner in which the centers are being established and the extent to which the United States and other countries are expected to use and financially support the centers.

PROTECTION AND CARE

Although conditions have improved since the 1979 GAO review, in many cases camps and transit centers are not adequately protecting refugees from crime and abuse. In addition, not all the camps are providing adequate care, including: food, medical care, shelter, water and sanitation facilities, supplies, safety, education, recreation, and self-reliance projects.

The absence of these essential services creates discontent among refugees, severely hampers resettlement, and may make other solutions, such as voluntary repatriation or local integration, impossible. Accordingly, GAO recommends that the Secretary of State encourage the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees to provide better protection and care for these people. Monitoring the expenditure of funds for refugee care also needs to be stepped up to make sure that funds are used as intended.

AGENCY COMMENTS

GAO requested the Secretary of State and the Attorney General to comment on a draft of this report on May 19, 1980. They did not provide comments within the 30-day time limitation allowed under the GAO Act of 1980 (Public Law 96-226) and did not request an extension of the time period. Accordingly, there are no agency comments in this report.

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ABBREVIATIONS

GAO	General Accounting Office
ICEM	Intergovernmental Committee for European Migration
INA	Immigration and Naturalization Act
INS	Immigration and Naturalization Service
JVA	Joint Voluntary Agency
OAR	Office of Asian Refugees
RPC	refugee processing center
SRV	Socialist Republic of Vietnam
U.N.	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees